

## Seamstresses in the city: modernity, mobility, and anxiety in post-world war two Italian film

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**Seamstresses in the City: Modernity, Mobility, and Anxiety  
in Post-World War Two Italian Film**

**Abstract:** This article examines the representations of Italian seamstresses in two post-World War II Italian films, *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* (Emmer, 1952), and *Le amiche* (Antonioni, 1955). Seamstresses were one of the few female workforces to gain notoriety and visibility in the urban landscape following World War II. They embody a critical contradiction between modernity and domesticity for women of this period. This article assesses how filmic representations are symptomatic of anxiety around women's work, increased female mobility, and changing gender roles. Doreen Massey's theory of space and gender (1994) is deployed to propose that urban space is not simply geographical, but is indicative of social space, ideological space, and gender relations.

**Key words:** Postwar Italy, gender, Italian film, work, urban space, mobility.

**Introduction**

Women's increasing visibility in urban spaces—mostly, but not exclusively as workers—was a point of contention and anxiety in postwar Italy. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey observes that “the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity” (179). Women's entry into professional and urban spaces was thus a threat to both organisational and gender norms. This threat was translated onto postwar cinema screens, where, as Mary Wood affirms, cinematic narratives which explored female mobility were “experienced as profoundly disorientating” (60-61).

Seamstresses were, in spatial terms, a privileged class of women in the Italian postwar economy. Historian Vanessa Maher describes the *sartoria* as a space for women “to transgress class boundaries, to evade the domestic and private norms considered proper to their sex [...] [and] to avoid male control” (“Sewing the Seams,” 145). Urban space is of crucial relevance to seamstresses' mobility and peculiar position as women and workers (137). Their mobility consisted not only of the physical act of going to the urban workplace, but the ideological and social implications of their work. How, then, were these mobile female bodies depicted on-screen in the rapidly changing context of postwar Italy? Taking the specific case of seamstresses, this article asks how film uses the city space and a focus on working women's bodies to express tension around emerging female mobility and identities in post-World War II Italy. It examines the spaces and places accorded

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to seamstresses in the two films *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* (Emmer) made in 1952, and *Le amiche* (Antonioni) made in 1955, and asks how and why, as feminist geographer Doreen Massey asserts, “spaces and places [...] reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179).

### Liminal Women

Seamstresses—in Italian, “le sarte”—frequently worked outside the home, often in urban environments, which opened them up to all the good and bad that an urban reality might present. They earned wages, which, although systematically lower than their male counterparts, gave them a degree of financial independence and agency.<sup>1</sup> They enjoyed greater social mobility, as they often came from *ceti popolari*, and they frequently became known and appreciated by upper-class clients, sometimes forming romantic relationships with them (Maher, *Tenere le fila* 286). This social mobility and its link to the modernising Italian nation is a theme to which we shall return. Yet, seamstresses’ work also fits into conventional notions of female employment. In Western societies, needlework, provision of clothing, and cultivation of appearance have been considered women’s work since antiquity.<sup>2</sup> As Victoria De Grazia points out, during Fascism women were forced out of specific professional sectors and encouraged into other, more acceptably feminine areas, including that of the seamstress (166). Works such as Aldo Palazzeschi’s novel *Sorelle Materassi* and its 1943 filmic adaptation by Fernando De Poggioli similarly brought out the contradictory nature of seamstresses’ gender identities. Palazzeschi himself in a letter to an editor described the Materassi sisters as embodying “sentimenti elementari della donna: maternità e amore” (Nicoletti 60). Yet, his choice of title—without a definite article—evokes the women not as characters, but as a business (Dei 24). Palazzeschi’s book was a best-seller, and critics were particularly interested in its representation of repressed female desire (Tellini CXXIII-IV). Cultural representations such as these of seamstresses who were both hyperfeminine but whose work complicated their feminine destinies may have influenced their filmic portrayals. In postwar Italy seamstresses occupied a liminal status which was at once transgressive and reassuring, allowing them to symbolise both new and old socio-political territory

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<sup>1</sup> Based on collective contracts and wage tables written between 1945 and 1963 and held at the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) archive in Bologna, we can observe that male workers (both in *sartorie per uomo* and *sartorie per signora*) earned consistently more than their female counterparts of the same category until the end of this period.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that although textile work has been historically dominated by female workers, high fashion, fashion design, and the creative or managerial levels of fashion have inversely been the historical preserve of men.

and gender identity. This fact is reflected in postwar film where, Wood states, cinema allowed “a wide variety of male and female roles, [...] to be rehearsed” (60).

### **Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna and Le amiche**

*Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* is a film directed by Luciano Emmer, a director known for his light-hearted comedies such as the 1950 *Domenica d'agosto*. Emmer was one of the founding fathers of “pink” neorealism, “comedies [produced] in response to the critical postwar years” (Carmini 467). Pink neorealism was a reaction to the bleakness of the first neorealist films, and articulated its narratives through laughter and sentimentality. Combining comedy and melodrama, *Le ragazze* follows the intertwining lives of three young seamstresses, Marisa, Lucia, and Elena (Lucia Bosè, Liliana Bonfatti, and Cosette Greco), and their passage as they court boyfriends who eventually become fiancés. Films belonging to the genre of “pink” neorealism are described by Vittorio Spinazzola as “pellicole commercialmente validissime [...] gradit[e] al pubblico sia delle grandi sale cittadine sia della periferia e provincia” (115). With box office receipts of four million lire (Chiti and Pioppi 303), *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* earned far above the average for films released between 1945 and 1959.<sup>3</sup> If it is true that “comedy, with its inherent optimistic beat, pulls in the direction of resolving anxiety about gender roles,” it is unsurprising that this film was both conservative in its portrayals of gender and well received by urban and rural postwar audiences alike (Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women* 16). The film's reception echoes claims made elsewhere that postwar Italian citizens craved a return to a conservative (and Catholic) pre-war social order (Tambor 15). Described as “vivace e gustoso” (Meccoli) by *Epoca* magazine, the traditionalist and reassuring narrative of Emmer's film may go some way to explaining its positive reception. It is also one of the ways in which *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* differs from *Le amiche*, which tends towards more ambiguous portrayals of femininity.

*Le amiche* was adapted from Cesare Pavese's novel *Tra donne sole* (1949), directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, and released in 1955. It recounts the return to her native Turin of protagonist and Roman fashion house supervisor Clelia (Eleonora Rossi Drago).<sup>4</sup> Co-written by Suso Cecchi d'Amico and Alba de

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<sup>3</sup> Although it was not among the highest grossing films of this period, *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* nonetheless earned well above the average box office receipts for the period between 1945 and 1965, which I have calculated at approximately 220,000,000 lire. This calculation was made using the box office figures of Italian films released between 1945 and 1965 listed in Chiti and Pioppi.

<sup>4</sup> *Tra donne sole* is the final instalment in Pavese's three-part series *La bella estate* (1949).

Céspedes, the film shows Clelia's entry into high society after discovering the failed suicide attempt of the wealthy Rosetta (Madeleine Fischer) in a neighbouring hotel room. The acquaintances Clelia makes following this incident introduce her to a set of upper-class, but ultimately morally corrupt and aimless characters. Clelia begins to fall for the working-class assistant architect Carlo (Ettore Manni) whom she meets at the construction site of the new *sartoria*. After an ambiguous flirtation between Carlo and Clelia, he proposes marriage, but after some prevarication Clelia rejects the proposal, citing too great a difference of lifestyles and expectations. Meanwhile, wealthy and married Momina (Yvonne Furneaux) conducts an affair with the architect Cesare (Franco Fabrizi), and Rosetta begins another with Lorenzo (Gabriele Ferzetti), the artist husband of another member of the group called Nene (Valentina Cortese). Rosetta asks Lorenzo to leave Nene, but he is too consumed with jealousy over Nene's artistic success in America and ultimately rejects Rosetta. In despair, she flees through the city streets and commits suicide by throwing herself from the harbour wall onto the concrete below. Clelia is consumed with rage over Rosetta's suicide and blames the nonchalance and moral degradation of her friends. She finds them at the public and elegant space of her *sartoria* and accuses them of being responsible for Rosetta's death. Having disgraced herself, Clelia later meets the owner of the Turin *sartoria* who sympathises with her choice of career over romance and allows Clelia to return to manage the Roman atelier. Both Pavese's novel and Antonioni's film are supposed to reveal the myth of a homogeneous postwar Italy, elucidating class differences and the fallacy of attributing war guilt to members of other classes (Binetti 202). *Le amiche* was a critical success, winning the *Leone d'argento* at the 1955 Venice Film Festival, but its popular reception was more muted, earning 256,740,000 lire (Chiti and Pioppi 31). The film's less enthusiastic popular reception may be explained in part by what Antonioni came to call later its *freddezza morale*, shot through with *ennui* in the form of ambiguous and unsatisfying characters and narrative.

### **Nationhood and Women's Work**

The study of postwar seamstresses ties in with a wider and much-neglected enquiry into how women workers were imagined in the postwar national landscape.<sup>5</sup> Eugenia Paulicelli observes that fashion was "a social institution of modernity. [...] Fashion and dress were intertwined with the idea of nation, identity and place" ("Italian fashion" 3). The fashion industry, its female

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of how women's work in post-World War II Italy is imagined and remembered, see my PhD thesis: *Representations and Oral Histories of Working Women in Post-World War Two Italy*, University of Bristol, 2018 (Derounian).

employees, and urban space were all synonymous with modernity and novelty in the postwar Italian nation.

Both *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* and *Le amiche* were made and released during what scholars have called the “restoration” period of the early 1950s and the increasingly affluent context of the economic boom which began later in the decade (Marcus 342). This period was particularly marked by women’s increased political visibility, after they gained the right to vote in 1946 and began to flood civic associations like the Unione delle Donne Italiane and Azione cattolica.<sup>6</sup> These factors meant that women were very much associated with the notion of Italy as a modern democracy. We should also recall the presence of the Christian Democrat government and its embrace of modernisation “strongly shaped by American influences, [...] the liberty of the individual and of the firm, the unfettered development of technology and consumer capitalism, [and] the free play of market forces” (Ginsborg 153-54).

The 1950s also marked a boom in the development of city space in Italy, both in terms of structure and demographics. Particularly from 1955 on, there was a “massive *rural* exodus in all parts of the peninsula”; consequently, “the major cities of Italy were transformed by this sudden influx” (Ginsborg 219-20). While this shift represented opportunity and affluence for many, it also caused significant social angst about the disruption of established social and gender hierarchies. Women’s increased visibility in professional and city spaces occurred in step with dramatic national and social change, and—as Vincenzo Binetti argues of Pavese’s *Tra donne sole*—this visibility articulated “a new ‘patria’ and a more credible national identity” (202). It is particularly pertinent that *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* and *Le amiche* are set in Rome and Turin respectively, two cities which experienced extensive damage during World War II, and which saw rapid rebuilding, growth, and modernisation between 1945 and 1960 (Avveduto 18). The choice of these specific cities as the setting for narratives about seamstresses heightens the symbolic connection between urban space, national reconstruction, modernity, and women’s work.

Custom-made (made-to-measure) fashion has strong identificatory ties with the modernising and industrialising context of 1950s Italy. In the postwar environment, fashion was associated with glamour, film, Hollywood, America, and consumerism. Paulicelli points out that it was particularly in the period between 1950 and 1960 that fashion began to play a key part in creating an international identity for Italy. She highlights the rise of “made in Italy” as symbolic of an embrace of America and, in a Cold War context, of capitalist

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<sup>6</sup> Pojmann notes that the Unione delle donne italiane counted one million members in 1950 (83).

values: “[...] the international recognition of Italian fashion was certified, facilitated and cemented by international relations between Italy and the United States, PR and business relations that were mutually beneficial during the Cold War” (“Italian Fashion,” 5). During this period, Italian fashion houses headed by female designers and seamstresses such as Sorelle Fontana, Maxmara, and Luisa Spagnoli rose to international prominence. The renown of Italian fashion was concurrent with that of the Italian Hollywood on the Tiber and the ascent of female stars like Sofia Loren, Lucia Bosè, and Silvana Mangano. In this way, fashion was a form of postwar diplomacy, populated and—to some extent—spearheaded by women.

The *sarte* studied here “svolgevano tipologie di lavoro più visibili [...] e molti commentatori dell’epoca parlavano di crescente presenza delle donne sul mercato del lavoro” (Willson, *Italiane* 207). They thus partook of the increasing visibility and mobility enjoyed by women in the postwar economy, a phenomenon that has been remarked upon by many historians. If political scientist Carole Pateman’s statement is true that “the dichotomy between the private and the public is central to almost two centuries of feminist struggle” (118), seamstresses are situated at a faultline in that terrain.

### **City Workplace and Public/Private Spheres**

Feminist geographers Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose have studied women’s access to and occupation of space, particularly noting the divisions between private and public. Portrayals of working women in specific spaces and places illustrate “dimensions along which run relations of power and control, or dominance and subordination” (Massey 88). The physical workspaces of postwar *sarte* are important because they provide the canvas upon which imaginary social power and gender orders were drawn.

In this period most tailoring work was undertaken as piecework and completed by domestic workers. The seamstresses represented in these films are remarkable because they work outside of the home in public urban spaces. The structures in which they worked were often strictly divided among private (*laboratorio*), semi-public (salon), and public (city, exterior). Seamstresses moved between these public and private spaces in a way which would have been impossible without their professional status. Urban seamstresses provided a counterpoint to domestic *sarte* whose work was “‘invisibile’ e non ‘memorabile’ per il grosso della società perché descritto come domestico, privato, a domicilio” (Maher, *Tenere le fila* 83-84). Recalling Pateman’s affirmation that women’s occupation of the public sphere has been the core concern of feminism (118), we can assert that by occupying public spaces in these films, professional seamstresses challenged patriarchal gender norms.

The seamstresses in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* are unmistakably urban and their workspace is clearly divided between public and private. The film's workspace setting was borrowed from the famous fashion house Sorelle Fontana, which also provided advice to the director.<sup>7</sup> The *sartoria* follows a common layout, featuring a street-level salon with eye-catching window displays, and an upstairs *laboratorio* where the seamstresses labour. The set depicts the strict spatial division into private (*laboratorio*), semi-public (salon), and public (exterior). The workroom environment is ordered and hospitable, with women grouped around long tables in a small, minimally furnished space. It is coded as quintessentially feminine; the seamstresses work in excessively close conditions, with the iron of one almost catching the hem of a garment another is sewing. The intimacy of the workspace allows the women to exchange romantic confidences without being overheard, transforming the professional space into a stereotypically feminine realm. Other elements such as the small mirror in the entrance where the women brush their hair before departing into the public space of the city also code the interior space as inherently female (Fig. 1).

The environment of the *laboratorio* is not only a safe space where women collaborate and confide but there are elements of the space which actually suggest gender role reversal. Where many other postwar films show women working under male instruction and surveillance, the seamstresses' *laboratorio* is managed by a diminutive but assertive young woman.<sup>8</sup> Pictures of male celebrities are pasted on the walls, not only increasing our impression of a female-gendered space, but implying that its occupants might reverse an objectifying male gaze. Maher notes of postwar Italian *sartorie* that "the atelier was perceived as a place of 'perdition,' 'equivocal,' suggest[ing] that here we are dealing with a social space that was anomalous and interstitial with respect to social structure" (Maher, "Sewing the Seams," 138). Filmic portrayals support Maher's statement and imply a transfer of power to women in their workspace.

However, outside the *atelier* is a busy urban street thick with traffic and pedestrians. The threat of the public space is evident: at the entrance to the *atelier* the girls remain in close groups, while when they are alone, they are immediately subjected to invasive male gazes and catcalls. We see this trope of the sexualisation and harassment of women in the public space repeated in a later

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<sup>7</sup> The Atelier Sorelle Fontana was one of Rome's most successful and celebrated fashion houses in the 1950s. The Fontana sisters themselves are said to have been involved in the production of *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*; fashion historian Rossana Bossaglia describes how "mentre il film [...] veniva girato, una della Sorelle Fontana (Miccol probabilmente) secondo Flamini era costantemente presente sul set" (69).

<sup>8</sup> For filmic examples of women working under male supervision, see, for example, *Riso amaro* (De Santis) or *Roma, ore 11* (De Santis).



scene in Villa Borghese when the protagonists are pursued by dozens of predatory men (Fig. 2).

The *laboratorio* and cloakroom are elevated above street level with a window whence the women look down, watching for the arrival of suitors (Fig. 3). This image recalls post-Unification paintings by the Macchiaoli that frequently depicted women gazing out at national change (and often also sewing *tricolore* flags) from inside domestic walls (Gundle, *Bellissima* 21-22). In a similar way, the seamstresses of *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* are concealed but able to observe the scene below, underlining a traditional reluctance for women to enter (or be seen in) the urban space alone. The contrast between public and private workspaces creates a dichotomy between the utopian female universe of the workroom and the implicit threat of the public city space. If it is true that “unequal class relations do not [...] exist on the head of a pin [but] are organised spatially” (Massey 87), then the spatial organisation of seamstresses’ workplaces suggests that men still rule the public city space and pose a threat to women working within it.

*Le amiche* also presents women in environments which are clearly divided between private workspaces and public urban spaces. As in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, the workplace is portrayed as a cosseted female universe. When Clelia first arrives, the *sartoria* is still under construction, and the barrier between public and private is but a flimsy layer of scaffolding. This pressing-in of the oppressive male public sphere is made explicit by the construction workers who objectify and patronise Clelia (Fig. 4). She has to fight for dominance in this space, resisting being sexualised and maternalised by the architect Cesare, who first comments on her physical appearance and youth and then asks if she has children. Within this space, Clelia states, “preferisco contare sulle mie forze,” establishing her independence and autonomy as a professional.

Clelia’s need to feminise the workspace is an explicit focus of the narrative. She explains that “il nostro è un ufficio per modo di dire. Deve avere un carattere,” suggesting the impossibility of women’s workspaces being purely professional. When Clelia later returns to the *sartoria* after a trying day of socialising, she tells Carlo, “[...] ho avuto bisogno di tornare a casa,” blurring the line between women’s professional and domestic spaces. Once the *sartoria* is fashioned into a space which connotes femininity, it becomes the site of female confidences and tears (such as those shed between Nene and Rosetta about their mutual love for Lorenzo), and bodily display (when models change and exhibit themselves at a fashion show). The ideological work being done here is the reconversion of professional spaces back into traditionally “feminine” contexts where women can be more comfortably situated. If we imagine a gender reversal here, it is that a male worker never has to describe his professional environment as “home,”

because his presence within the workspace is neither uncomfortable nor transgressive.

Female characters move uninhibited between the *sartoria*'s semi-public and private spaces, echoing *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* by showing women occupying more mobile and autonomous roles, finding a sense of identity and intimacy in the workplace. When the architect Cesare transgresses the boundaries of this female space and enters the workroom, he causes immediate disarray and implied sexual threat, asking, "non avete mai visto un uomo vestito?" This exchange recalls Danielle Hipkins's analysis of the film *Noi vivi* (Alessandrini) and her observation that male entrance into female spaces carries sexual threat and suggests "access to her interiority, as well as her absent naked body" (Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women* 58). In this way, women's workspaces are portrayed as both quintessentially female, potentially emancipatory, but perpetually subject to an external male threat.

### **Mobility and the Modern City**

In their study of Italians' experience of the pre- and postwar period, David Forgacs and Stephen Gundle note how "one of the principal ways in which many people represent the *temporal* difference between then [prewar] and now [postwar] is in terms of this difference in *spatial* mobility and movement [...] now space is more permeable; people are more mobile" (10; italics in original). This symbolic link between mobility and postwar modernity is also present in portrayals of women's work. "New" womanhood is associated with the city space principally because of the increased mobility which cities gave women; including wider economic, professional, social, sexual, cultural, and spatial opportunities. Maher notes how seamstresses moved through "the streets and squares in Italy [...] where the social order is represented, mocked, undermined, and renegotiated" ("Sewing the Seams," 139). In the films, the result of this mobility is twofold: one outcome, as Binetti argues, is that women are able to find "'other' paths through which they express their identities" (207). The other outcome, however, echoes Elizabeth Wilson's caution that women in the city are made to "symbolise [...] the promise of sexual adventure. This promise was converted into a more general moral and political threat" (6).

*Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* is set in Rome, a city "at the core of all [...] dreams of rebirth in Western culture" (Jeannet 99). This is especially true of the Rome of the 1950s, a capital city which "put on beautiful new clothes" and became what Paulicelli calls "a fashion city" ("Fashioning Rome," 257). Not only does the film's title explicitly evoke the city space, but the its mise-en-scène foregrounds the importance of the urban environment. It pictures its female protagonists in iconic locations like Villa Borghese, Termini station, and in public

spaces like dances, bicycle races, and the zoo (Fig. 5).

The link between the urban environment and the female characters' mobility is demonstrated by their journeys from work to their family homes: Lucia and Elena walk home alone or with male suitors through recognisable urban landscapes, and Marisa travels in a motorcar—still an unusual signifier of wealth and modernity in the 1950s—with her boyfriend Augusto. The women gain not only spatial independence in this journey through the urban space, but also greater social and sexual freedom, echoing Chiara Saraceno's argument that in postwar Italy privacy was only possible in "the spaces and relationships of external society [...] in public places, to be sure, but ones that were outside the control or just the excessively close presence of family and neighbours" (54). In *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, we notice that the public space is rife with romantic opportunity and sexual threat for women. The seamstresses' city setting is shown to lend itself to greater mobility but also to the transgression of socio-sexual norms.

Moments of sexual threat in the films underline the specifically modern nature of the city space. Frames like the one picturing Lucia being carried off on a bicycle under the shadow of a departing aeroplane make semiotic associations between the city, modernity, leisure, and transgressive female mobility (Fig. 6).

There are also detailed references to modern features of urban Rome. The film specifies the train that Lucia takes home—"la Littorina delle sette e trentacinque dalla stazione Termini"—and refers to precise city locations such as Capannelle and Garbatella. To postwar audiences, these names were recognisable modern features of city life: the Littorina was a new kind of train introduced to Rome in 1933 which could travel at speeds of up to one hundred kilometres per hour, and Capannelle and Garbatella were both recently constructed and populated residential areas south and southeast of Rome, respectively. Capannelle was situated in close proximity both to a famous horseracing track and its eponymous train station. The station was constructed in 1939 and provided a major route to and from the metropolis. Garbatella was erected in 1920 in the progressive style of a "garden city" and, according to Antonella De Michelis, "reflected contemporary attitudes towards progress [and] modernity" (153). These features and areas of postwar Rome serve to underline the newness of the existences and spaces portrayed on screen. As Angela Jeannet argues concerning twentieth-century women's fiction of Rome, specific city locations underline the "solidly present, slowly changing [...] city" (102). The same is true of these filmic portrayals of seamstresses in the capital; their presence and mobility in the city space drew spectators' attention to the changing dynamics of the modern city and thus of the postwar nation.

*Le amiche* similarly draws on the city space to evoke a very modern social context. The film was made using actual locations in Turin, "a city in itself rife

with internal contradictions” between a politicised working class and a powerful bourgeoisie (Binetti 201). These social contradictions are embodied by the originally working-class Clelia and the bored aristocratic Momina (Yvonne Furneaux) and her entourage. Clelia is often pictured in her urban surroundings: in cafés or restaurants and walking through Turin’s streets. As in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, *Le amiche* associates women’s urban setting with greater mobility and modernity. For example, the urbane Momina arrives in the narrative from the city space outside Clelia’s hotel. She quite literally leads Clelia from private to public space, and thus into the narrative action. Momina indicates her waiting motor car at the same time as she reveals her unconventional marital arrangement (Fig. 7); living independently from her husband, she explains, “è meglio per lui e per me.” This scene thereby creates an equivalence between the city and new sexual and gender behaviours. The women travel through Turin alone, not only moving but *driving themselves* through the narrative, recalling Binetti’s argument that women in the city space are offered narrative paths which differ from conservative female destinies (207).

The city space also provides the opportunity to portray characters moving across diverse class spaces. When Clelia visits the working-class neighbourhood where she grew up, Carlo tells her (and the audience): “[...] non abiti più in posti come questo,” underlining the social and spatial transition she has made thanks to her profession. Clelia not only attends soirées in the *atelier* and art galleries, but contrastingly visits a reclaimed furniture yard and a shabby *rosticceria* with Carlo. Of this occurrence Carlo exclaims, “[...] non credevo che lei venisse in un posto così,” alluding to what Binetti calls the “impossibility of [Clelia] establishing a harmonic relationship either with ‘her’ city, this being the poor proletarian quarter she came from, or with the empty and false aristocratic community of Turin” (205). Clelia’s ultimate estrangement from both old and new Turin problematises the social mobility available to women in the urban space. It also evokes the fractures in postwar Italian cities between modernity and the past. The urban setting of *Le amiche*, with its variety of spaces and places, shows seamstresses as spatially and socially mobile, but casts a shadow over this mobility as these women ultimately become rudderless anomalies.

In her study of portrayals of women in the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, Wood has shown how “women’s entry into new spaces and places can be ‘profoundly disorientating’” (60-61). Like Clelia, Rosetta is afforded greater spatial mobility in the city space. Her mother is self-absorbed and allows Rosetta to leave the rural family home unsupervised. She is able to meet Lorenzo in anonymous hotels and parks, but this freedom ultimately translates into a suicidal lack of purpose. Angst around women in the city space is poignantly evident in the hyper-public setting of Rosetta’s suicide. She is first pictured running down a

dark urban alleyway to her death (Fig. 8), and finally framed in a high-angle shot where a crowd gathers to watch her corpse being collected (Fig. 9).

Women's mobility in the city space emerges as both emancipatory and transgressive in these films, offering a degree of—often problematised—freedom. As Wood has observed, in this period of profound social change films allowed “a wide variety of male and female roles, successful and unsuccessful to be rehearsed” (60). Their conclusions, however, often return women to conservative spaces or else kill them off. Denying female characters the possibility of harmoniously occupying the city space might be read as reassuring a public desire for the return to traditional social and gender orders.

### Sex and the City

I have argued that urban seamstresses are associated with novelty and modernity. Maher underlines that “le sarte furono in prima fila nell’entusiasarsi per i nuovi modi di vivere” (*Tenere le fila* 17-18). Yet, with novelty comes threat and tension in postwar Italy, where new “ideas of the development of the economy and society clashed with those of Catholic integralism, which emphasized the need for society to correspond to and reflect Catholic values” (Ginsborg 154). Particularly regarding women's work, Catholicism continued to perceive a conflict between paid labour and the sacred role of the mother. It was not only the Church, however, which fretted about women's new professional visibility and modern behaviour. As Maher explains, “tutte le parti—socialisti, chiesa cattolica, regime fascista—si trovavano concordi sulla necessità della subordinazione femminile, sul ruolo prioritario della donna in famiglia, sulla condanna delle sarte a causa del loro modo di vestire, [e] di cedere alle lusinghe del ballo” (*Tenere le fila* 18). In exploring the elision of women's work, fashion, dance, and sexual and social threat, we will look specifically at how filmic seamstresses' occupation of the city space is linked to sexual corruption and the destruction of conservative safeguards on morality.

In *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, the city provides spatial opportunity for illicit sexual behaviour. Elena is coerced into sexual contact by her boyfriend Alberto, who leads her off the charted territory of the city's main streets and into forbidden spaces and behaviours (Fig. 10). She pleads with him, “[...] mamma mi aspetta sempre con una faccia; [...] prometti che non facciamo tardi,” thereby highlighting her deviation from sexual and moral norms. Her mother's disapproval of Elena's urban excursions also stresses the generational divide between the spaces and morals of new and old Italy. Using dramatic irony, the film makes the audience aware before Elena that Alberto is not *un tipo per bene*, and that he is only using Elena for the real estate that she will inherit upon her marriage. Elena eventually discovers that Alberto is in fact engaged to the

daughter of his *capufficcio*. This discovery occurs in the ultra-urban setting of Rome's central train station. When Elena subsequently attempts suicide, it is in the warehouse of the *sartoria*, again linking her peril to the professional and urban setting. Elena's deceitful and degrading relationship with a man she met on the city streets feeds into portrayals of the urban space as a breeding ground for destructive sexuality, as Wilson predicts (6).

Responding to Maher's assertion that the *sarte* were particularly infamous for dancing and fraternising with men, it is worth observing closely the three dance scenes included in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*, all of which suggest a threat to the traditional social order. Dance scenes in postwar film provided an opportunity for contemplating popular culture and the eroticised female body. Moreover, dance was a feature of postwar culture that the Church explicitly opposed to such an extent that, as film scholar Daniela Treveri-Gennari argues, "all of the female characters of the films banned by the Centro Cattolico Cinematografico are to a certain extent the image of that immorality from which the Roman Catholic Church wanted to free the cinema: working women, prostitutes, singers and dancers" ("Blessed" 130). This statement reveals the associations made in postwar Italy between working women, dance, and immorality, and, not coincidentally, dance in postwar film figured prominently as a vehicle for discussions of female sexuality, morality, and modernity.

The first dance scene in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* shows Lucia at a Sunday open-air dance with a man she meets on her journey home. Her miserly suitor avoids purchasing full-price tickets and is expelled; immediately afterward, Lucia is grabbed by a strange man and embroiled in a fight. The setting of the dance is imbued with semiotic references to modernity and foreign influence, including the Coca-Cola signs on the walls and the intradiegetic American-style rockabilly music (Fig. 11). At the very moment when the band switches from an Italian to an American song, violence erupts reinforcing Forgacs's and Gundle's argument that American boogie-woogie was imagined to have a corrupting influence on Italian youth (64). The scene closes with Lucia departing through a landscape marked by the contrasting semiotic signifiers of ancient ruins and modern electricity pylons, a frame that displays the dissonant co-existence of the old and the new (Fig. 12). The landscape mirrors the clash between conservative and emerging social orders.

Both this image and that of Elena and Alberto straying into a cornfield speak of the specificity of Italian postwar urbanisation. It is evident from these images that the city and the periphery often have frayed borders. Elena Vacchelli highlights the particularity of Italian urbanisation: "[...] in Italy rather than suburbs, it is more appropriate to refer to it [the area around the metropolis] as a 'diffused city' or 'periphery'" (36). Italo Insolera describes the Roman *borgata* as

a “subspecies of borgo: a piece of the city in the middle of the country, that is not really one or the other” (135-36), while John David Rhodes notes that the *borgate* were linked to invisibility. In the films examined here the peripheries are indeed murky extensions of the city space; where the city presents highly visible opportunities for new gender behaviours in the “invisible” unsurveilled suburbs, these occasions tip over into moments of explicit threat. It is precisely the fact that the *borgate* and their inhabitants were “out of sight [...] rendered invisible to the public eye” that made them ideal sites of transgression in film (Zeier Pilat 85). Seamstresses’ movement between the modern city and its peripheries echoes the fraught boundaries between new and old orders and norms in postwar Italy.

In the next dance scene, Marisa appears in the luxurious setting of a fashion show dancing with an unknown man. In the following shot, she stumbles drunkenly out of the venue and is whisked away in his convertible. The threat of this situation is underlined by onlooker Lucia, who immediately hails a taxi and follows the couple, anxiously asking the unwitting driver (Marcello Mastroianni), “[...] ma non li legge lei i giornali? Tutti i giorni delitti, ammazzamenti, rapine, ricatti.” In the final dance scene, Elena and good-guy traditionalist Marcello (previously Lucia’s taxi driver) dance together, employing a conspicuously conventional style against the background of other dancers doing the boogie-woogie to fast-paced music. Marcello observes, “[...] non sono molto adatto a questo tipo di ballo,” marking him out as traditional and—because of his precipitous marriage proposal—virtuous. The message is evident: when dance is nostalgic and performed in the company of a trusted male, it can only lead to traditional narrative resolutions (in this case, marriage). However, when women are unaccompanied and dance is linked to modernity and luxury, it is problematised and doomed to disaster. Dance scenes reflect the moments of moral panic over female sexuality and modernity.

Similarly, in *Le amiche*, women in the urban space represent increased mobility, sexual adventure, and moral threat. Most of the characters’ significant moments of sexual transgression occur in the public space: Rosetta and Lorenzo begin their affair on the city’s outskirts along the banks of the Po, Mariella seduces Cesare on the beach, and Clelia leaves Carlo in the train station. These locations are more accurately liminal urban spaces; characters move into blurred areas just outside of the city space to mark their most transgressive moments. Even when Momina and Cesare become lovers, we are shown the scene from the urban space outside Momina’s flat (Fig. 13). The audience looks in through the window in an up-shot from street level. The perspective is mirrored by that of an anonymous man who, at street level, emerges from the city space to seduce Momina’s maid while Momina is occupied with Cesare (Fig. 14). These simultaneous seductions underline the city space as excessively sexual.

Again, it is not just the city that is threatening, but the fact that it draws women into a corrupting (male) public space. Momina points audiences to the debasing nature of the public space for women saying, “[...] secondo me se un uomo ti bacia in pubblico vuol dire che non sente niente.” In a later scene, the group arrives at an urban restaurant where Lorenzo observes the proximity of a brothel. *Le amiche*’s problematised portrayals of female sexuality in the urban space echoes Binetti’s reading of *Tra donne sole* in which, he argues, the city is “reduced to an almost infernal landscape [...] within which the community of women becomes emblematically equated [...] to the level of prostitutes” (206).

Antonioni’s Clelia contravenes conservative sexual morality, but in ways that are significantly less transgressive than the Clelia of Pavese’s novel. In the latter, Clelia has sex with both the architect and his assistant; in Antonioni’s film, she only kisses the assistant. Where in the novel Clelia goes out alone with a variety of men and refers to her own previous sexual relationships, in the film she does not mention sex at all. Finally, Pavese’s Clelia chooses to stay single and explicitly rejects motherhood, whereas Antonioni’s Clelia suggests that she is single because she should have married younger. Although Antonioni’s Clelia flirts with new expressions of female sexuality, she fails to push them to definitively transgressive conclusions. Binetti remarks that Pavese’s Clelia is symbolic of the “profound conflicts of a ‘modernity’ that in its violent process of self-celebration and in its urgent desire to ‘reconstruct’ [causes] the solitude and desperation of these women obliged to ‘inhabit’ the urban space” (209). Antonioni’s Clelia cannot be said to make such a definitive statement about the effect of the city space on women’s morality or destiny.

More, however, can be said about the link between Clelia’s profession and her sexual behaviour in *Le amiche*. The film presents women’s romantic and professional fulfilment as mutually exclusive. Clelia argues that work can replace conservative female destinies, saying that “lavorare è anche il mio modo di essere donna, di partecipare alla vita.” At the film’s conclusion, Clelia is allowed the narrative possibility of returning to Rome to continue her satisfying and rewarding work. The destiny afforded to Clelia is markedly different from that of other female heroines of this time, so often embroiled in melodramatic plots which saw them ultimately contained within Catholic spaces of marriage or convent.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Clelia’s choice of work over romance is simultaneously suggested to be a cause of regret or resignation to her. Clelia refuses Carlo’s hand with the words, “appartengo ad un mondo diverso. Lo rimpiangerei sono certa. Sono troppo abituata alla mia indipendenza per essere una moglie tranquilla in una casa

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<sup>9</sup> For more conventional female narratives in postwar melodramas, see, for example *Catene* (Matarazzo), *Anna* (Lattuada), or *L’angelo bianco* (Matarazzo).



modesta.” The suggestion is that work has permanently shifted Clelia’s ability to fit into conventional female roles and spaces. In this imaginary, the city workplace is not compatible with the traditional roles of wife and mother.

My analysis of *Le amiche* has uncovered what Binetti describes as the narrative’s “mysterious and contradictory” approach to women’s work and sexuality (209). In 1950s Italy, cinema was somewhat beholden to the powerful Centro Cattolico Cinematografico and its extensive network of parish cinemas, as well as to government financing from the Christian Democrats. Films which were approved by the CCC might receive grants, as well as increased box office receipts from parish screenings (Treveri-Gennari, “Blessed” 259). Even outside of the *cinema parrocchiali* network, viewing *Le amiche* was only allowed to over-sixteens in 1955. The scene showing Cesare and Mariella embracing on the beach was cut in the televised version released in 1978, as was the scene in the train where Rosetta and Clelia discuss the pointlessness of life (*Italia Taglia*). This censorship points to an Italy still beholden to Catholic values of female chastity and the condemnation of suicide. As such, the cinematic Clelia is perhaps unsurprisingly a stunted portrayal of the emancipated urban working woman.

### ***Bodies Politic***

Italy has historically been marked by an obsession with the female body (Gundle, *Bellissima*). Pope Pius XII, in his message “La missione della donna per la salvaguardia della dignità della donna e del costume” from 1941, “esorta la donna a vestirsi con modestia, con dignità, contro l’edonismo sfrenato [del] cinema” (Bossaglia et al. 42), while Giulio Andreotti famously requested “more legs” in national film production in 1949 (Franco 52). Women’s bodies were a site where concerns about morality and nationhood were negotiated. As influential players in vestimentary practices, seamstresses participated in the construction and exhibition of women’s bodies and, by extension, played a part in national and gender politics.

The city space, with its connotations of sexual threat and moral degradation, is an apt setting for depictions of transgressive female bodies. Massey argues that “metropolitan life itself seemed to throw up such a threat to patriarchal control” (180). Italian film reinforced this assertion by portraying urban seamstresses as physically, socially, and sexually mobile female bodies.

The way in which seamstresses are shown to harness the power of their bodies coheres with what Pierre Bordieu calls “embodied cultural capital.” Embodied cultural capital refers to the process by which the body becomes “a [...] possessor of power, status and distinctive symbolic forms which is integral to the accumulation of various resources and capital” (Shilling 111-12). Gundle notes that in postwar Italy “the prominence that beauty issues [...] acquired [...] meant that they were inevitably drawn into the broader political and cultural disputes

that were dividing the country” (*Bellissima* 125); likewise, Hipkins observes “how clothing in filmic representations [...] in this period becomes the key factor in negotiating the relationship between female body, gender roles, and moral codes” (*Italy’s Other Women* 55). Although Hipkins is referring to the specific case of prostitutes in postwar Italy, her observation can be broadened to include all women. In postwar film, fashioning the body impacts women’s agency and potentially empowers them to occupy diverse spaces and places. Seamstresses, whose very business was the elaboration of vestimentary identity and value, manage the embodiment of capital not only for their clients but also for themselves. Maher points out “nei racconti delle sarte, ci sono molti accenni ai vantaggi sociali derivanti dalla bellezza, capitale fisico delle classi povere” (*Tenere le fila* 180). A press article in the magazine *Il sarto* notes the transgressive nature of the *sarte*’s manipulation of physical appearance, describing how “godono di una stima, che è una disistima generale” (Imprenti 169). Postwar films explored seamstresses’ management of embodied capital and its inherent opportunities and limitations.

Social ascent through the fashioned body was an issue of concern in 1950s Italy, where “the whole idea of beauty and of attractiveness was being redefined in a way that tended to displace traditional evaluations. A new emphasis was being placed on exterior appearance, on the physical, and on the whole body” (Forgacs and Gundle 74). This new emphasis conflicted with Catholic doctrine which rejected “the evaluation of beauty in terms of exterior appearance” (Gundle, *Bellissima* 126), meaning that embodied capital acquired a modern and transgressive character. Réka Buckley has written about the social ascent of Italian female stars of the 1940s and 1950s, who used fashion and bodily transformation both on and off screen (“Dressing the Part”; “Glamour”). Buckley underlines that gaining social mobility as a female star was not only about being attractive, but about being *fashioned*; she cites the examples of Lucia Bosè and Silvana Mangano and their transitions from *popolane* in the 1940s to aristocratic characters during the 1950s and beyond (“Glamour”). In addition, she emphasises how important it was for social transformation to be embodied, referring to Mangano who subjected herself to a punitive diet in order to shrink to a more fashionable size. Eleonora Rossi Drago, who plays Clelia in *Le amiche*, underwent a similar process of physical alteration as an actress, subjecting herself to three rhinoplasties.<sup>10</sup> Buckley notes how she went on “to star in urban dramas where awareness shifted to an emphasis on fashion and clothes [...]; her role [in *Le amiche*] [...] demonstrated once again how fashion and grooming [...] were an essential part of the glamorising procedure” (“Glamour” 276). The offscreen

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<sup>10</sup> The story goes that Director Carlo Ponti “le aveva fatto una corte serrata e le aveva convinta a operarsi al naso” (Giacobini 23).

transformations of both Mangano and Rossi Drago highlight Bourdieu's insistence on the fungibility of symbolic, social, and economic capital; or, more simply, how "nonmonetary forms can hold just as much power as their paper equivalent" (Portes 2). Yet, the transformations of these women also imply the problematic nature of embodied capital, as it can be both punitive and ephemeral.

In the two Italian films under discussion, the clearest examples of women increasing their economic and social mobility through embodied physical capital come from Marisa in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* and Clelia in *Le amiche*. Marisa's use of her body as a fashion model gains her access to the upper classes, travel, and glamour, as well as the promise of "una strada sicura" from the owner of the *sartoria*. In *Le amiche*, Clelia's trajectory from working-class girl to successful and glamorous woman is made visually credible to an audience which understands her new identity through her appearance—expensive, luxurious, fashionable. Thus, as Hipkins asserts women's "struggle over how they dress marks the limits of their self-determination, and of their ability to control how others read them" (Hipkins, *Italy's Other Women* 60). Of her success, Clelia states, "[...] preferisco contare sulle mie forze," highlighting the fact that embodied capital withers and dies with its bearer ("dépérit et meurt avec son porteur," Bourdieu 4; translation mine). Women's cultivation of embodied capital is implicitly liberal and individualistic, and it therefore manifests the most contentious aspects of the modernity that was dawning in postwar Italy (Ginsborg 153).

Perhaps because of this tension, the social ascent of both Marisa and Clelia incurs penalties and creates problems. The anxiety that Marisa's promotion causes is highlighted in a number of ways: not only does it provoke her boyfriend Augusto to beat her for changing her appearance, but he conflates embodied capital with prostitution saying, "[...] mi si è presentata davanti con le unghie rosse, pettinata in su; [...] sembrava una di quelle." The blurring of cultivating embodied capital with sex work recalls Peter Brook's observation that the "sold body" (be it in fashion or sex work) becomes a "deviant" body (130). For Augusto, Marisa not only sells a product, but she herself becomes the product. The city space facilitates this conflation, highlighting Binetti's remark that women in the city are "equated [...] to the level of prostitutes" (206). Characters' manipulation of embodied physical capital produces anxiety because it disrupts and transgresses established social hierarchies. Hipkins tells us that "the deceit that dressing-up entails is intimately connected to [...] the 'unknowability' of the prostitute, and woman herself" (*Italy's Other Women* 62). The woman who dresses up is a duplicitous shapeshifter, not to be trusted. Recalling Bourdieu's description of embodied capital disrupting class hierarchies as "fatal attraction" (Shilling 124), one can see precisely this threat embodied by the *sarte*. Reducing these working

women to prostitutes is a way of containing and condemning their social and professional mobility. Mary Wood notes that “the figure of the woman who uses her sexuality to move up a class echoes the position of a nation which is losing its integrity in subscribing to economic prosperity” (57), underlining how women’s bodies express anxiety caused by changing gender roles as a consequence of the national embrace of modernity in postwar Italy.

### Conclusion

Seamstresses may have experienced greater spatial and social mobility, but the examination of *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna* and *Le amiche* bears out how this mobility was experienced as profoundly unsettling. The city space was an essential backdrop to the portrayals of these working women, against which key themes—the occupation of public space, sexual corruption, and modernity—could be explored. We have seen how women’s work in the city was often portrayed ambiguously, often giving women greater opportunity and even independence. The city as portrayed in these films introduced women to new behaviours and destinies, but more often than not the resolutions to these new pathways returned female characters to conservative conclusions. Workplaces, for example, were coded as hyperfeminine, and as enclaves of safety for women within a threatening metropolis. The public nature of the city space was also thrown into relief by these films, and went hand-in-hand with ruminations around unconstrained sexuality. Most of all, the city space provided the opportunity to represent modernity in infrastructure, architecture, and popular culture. These factors served to underline women’s presence in new spaces and to cast a dubious eye on that presence.

It would be overly simplistic to suggest that the drive to portray the city space as threatening to women came from film makers alone. It is clear from film criticism and a brief study of censorship practises in the 1950s that there was a climate of conservatism. Viewing figures similarly confirm that audiences flocked to films which exhibited traditional values. For that reason, we can realistically suggest that the portrayals of seamstresses in the city in these films reflect a widespread anxiety over women’s increased bodily and social mobility in postwar Italy. Yet, we should take care not to underestimate the impact of these depictions on Italian citizens. Treveri-Gennari, like Gundle and Forgacs, found that audiences considered postwar Italian films and characters as “closer to us and our reality” than foreign imports (“If You Have Seen It,” 61). The very existence—not to say ambiguity—of the films’ portrayals of working women indicates the impetus towards different spatial and gender orders which would continue to expand in postwar Italy.





Figure 1. The *laboratorio* in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 2. Seamstresses move from the private workspace to the public city space in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 3. Seamstresses gaze down at the public city space from the safety of the sartoria in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.





Figure 4. Clelia is appraised by workmen occupying the liminal space of the *sartoria* under construction in *Le amiche*.



Figure 5. Elena and Alberto go to the zoo on Sundays in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 6. Lucia and her suitor on a bicycle under the shadow of an aeroplane in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 7. Momina and Clelia get into Momina's car to drive alone through the city in *Le amiche*.

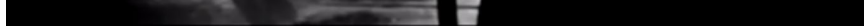


Figure 8. Rosetta flees despairingly into the urban space in *Le amiche*.



Figure 9. Rosetta's body is collected in the hyper-public city space in *Le amiche*.



Figure 10. Alberto leads Elena into a field of corn on her journey out of the metropolis in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 11. A Coca-Cola sign adorns the walls of a dance venue in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.





Figure 12. Lucia cycles through a landscape of ancient ruins and electricity pylons in *Le ragazze di Piazza di Spagna*.



Figure 13. Momina and Cesare embrace in her flat in *Le amiche*.



Figure 14. Momina's maid carries on her own sexual transgression in *Le amiche*.

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